Stimulus-Response Model

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Stimulus–Response Model

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The stimulus–response model is associated with the assumption that the mass media has powerful effects. Also referred to as the "hypodermic needle theory," "transmission belt theory," or "magic bullet theory," it can be considered one of the first general conceptions describing mass media effects (→ Media Effects, History of). Lowery and DeFleur (1995) summarized the basic assumptions behind the stimulus–response or hypodermic needle theory as follows: (1) people in a mass society lead socially isolated lives, exerting very limited social control over each other because they have diverse origins and do not share a unifying set of norms, values, and beliefs; (2) similar to higher animals, human beings are endowed at birth with a uniform set of instincts that guide their ways of responding to the world around them; (3) because people's actions are not influenced by social ties and are guided by uniform instincts, individuals attend to events (such as media messages) in similar ways; and (4) people's inherited human nature and their isolated social condition lead them to receive and interpret media messages in a uniform way.

In this model, media messages are seen as "symbolic bullets," striking every eye and ear, resulting in effects on thought and behavior that are direct, immediate, uniform, and therefore powerful. According to the generally accepted history of media effects research, the stimulus–response model was the guiding perspective in the media effects field during the early days of communication study. Although this "received view" on the field's history does not go unquestioned, it is still influential.

ORIGINS OF THE MODEL

During the early decades of the twentieth century, communication scholars derived the stimulus–response model from a questionable interpretation of the psychological and sociological theories prevalent at that time (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1982). *First*, so-called instinct psychology, developed shortly after the turn of the century, was interpreted to show that the media targeted stimuli toward internal, biologically determined drives, emotions, and other processes beyond rational control. Therefore, the same, or at least

similar, reactions were triggered in all individuals. *Second*, theories of mass society, prevalent during that time period, were construed to state that the audience existed in an urbanized and industrialized society that was volatile, unstable, rootless, alienated, and inherently susceptible to manipulation. As a result, people were regarded to be defenseless against and at the mercy of the capricious stimuli of the media. This was particularly the case as early ideas maintained that mass media were run primarily by people and organizations that were deliberately trying to exert a targeted influence upon recipients (like media tycoons, wartime governments, and advertisers; → Propaganda; Advertising).

The *third factor* contributing to a belief in all-powerful mass media was early propaganda research in the United States. According to → Harold D. Lasswell, who dealt with World War I propaganda in his doctoral dissertation, "the strategy of propaganda . . . can readily be described in the language of stimulus–response. The propagandist may be said to be concerned with the multiplication of those stimuli which are best calculated to evoke the desired response, and with the nullification of those stimuli which are likely to instigate the undesired response" (Lasswell 1927, 630). The standard history of the field interprets this quotation by Lasswell – who undoubtedly was one of the fathers of mass communication research – as representative of the mindset of the generation of media scholars at that time.

In the 1930s there was much concern in the United States over the success of Nazi propaganda in Hitler's Germany. At that time there were also regular demonstrations by Nazi supporters in many places in the US, as, for example, in New York's Madison Square Garden. For this and other reasons the Institute for Propaganda Analysis was founded in 1937, and social psychologist Hadley Cantril became its first president. Cantril's study *The invasion from Mars* (1940) is generally seen as the *fourth* most impressive piece of evidence for the efficacy of the stimulus–response model: the right stimulus – a frightening media message – almost automatically led to a panic reaction on the part of the defenseless recipients. On October 30, 1938 a fictional radio drama unleashed mass panic. Orson Welles had staged H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* in such a gripping and vivid manner that many radio listeners who had missed the announcement and beginning of the program were convinced their lives were threatened by an invasion from Mars. On the next day, the front-page headline of the *New York Daily News* proclaimed: "Fake Radio War Stirs Terror Through US." *Finally*, Merton's 1946 analysis of a Kate Smith war bond drive also reflects the assumptions of the stimulus–response model. Merton (1946) wrote that "never before the present day has the quick persuasion of masses of people occurred on such a vast scale . . . Masses of men move in paths laid down for them by those who persuade."

Merton, Herbert Blumer, and Cantril also discussed intervening variables in the causal process but the standard history of the field interprets their studies as being motivated by an initial belief in the stimulus–response model of mass communication. How did this become the "received view" of the field? Because the first – and vastly influential – historical construction of media effects research stated that it was so. This refers to the book *Personal influence* (1955) in which → Elihu Katz and → Paul Lazarsfeld asserted that early effects research was guided by the following framework: "that of the omnipotent media, on the one hand, sending forth a message, and the atomized masses, on the other, waiting to receive it, and nothing in between." Their account is seen as the "most important source" for the standard construction of media effects history (Delia 1987). Other research monographs (Klapper 1960), essays (Bauer & Bauer 1960), and

textbooks (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1982) repeated this received history for generations of communication scholars.

CRITICISM OF THE STIMULUS–RESPONSE MODEL

Recently, increasing numbers of scholars have been disputing this received view and arguing that the direct effects, or hypodermic needle, model was never endorsed by early mass communication research, but that it was instead a *straw man* invented by Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) that they could easily knock down by demonstrating its weaknesses. Lang and Lang (1981) were the first to dismiss the standard history by stating: "Few, if any, reputable social scientists in the pre-World-War II era . . . worked with what was later described as the hypodermic needle model." Even 15 years later, Lang (1996, 15) had still not managed "to find a footnote to a scholarly book or article that espouses it." Indeed, authors who proclaimed that the stimulus–response model was the prevalent paradigm of this time cite not one study from the 1920s or 1930s that could be considered mass communication research and at the same time would support their stimulus–response claims. Hence, Chaffee and Hochheimer (1985) argue that the hypodermic needle model described by Katz and Lazarsfeld misrepresents the field's history; indeed, that it was created as a foil against which their own limited effects model could be contrasted and presented as an impressive paradigm shift.

What are the critics' arguments in dismissing the recorded history above? *First*, they doubt that early media effects researchers were strongly influenced by nineteenth-century European social theorists like Toennies, Durkheim, or Le Bon and their concepts of mass society – so much so, that some critics (e.g., Chaffee & Hochheimer 1985) voiced doubts that there were ever any serious proponents of mass society theory. As Czitrom (1982) concluded, "the whole notion of a theory of mass society was something of an artificial and spurious construct, an intellectual straw man created by its opponents." Katz (1987), as a direct target of these allegations, recently admitted that empirical studies at the time were indeed not guided by mass society theory; nevertheless, he believes that "it was a highly prevalent image among both political and cultural philosophers."

Second, critics of the standard theory have difficulty taking seriously the isolated reference that Lasswell makes to stimulus–response in his propaganda study. They point out that early propaganda studies were more descriptions of content and of execution than they were tests of effects, and that they had little to do with communication research as we know it (Lang & Lang 1981; Delia 1987). They also point out that Lasswell played no important role in media effects research of the time – he was cited in no significant effects study during this time period (Chaffee & Hochheimer 1985; Delia 1987).

The *third reason* lies in a diametrically opposite interpretation of early classic studies like Cantril's *War of the worlds* study or the famous Payne Fund studies. Both investigations in no way discovered uniform stimulus–response effects. Instead, they recognized early on that there were individual differences in reactions to media stimuli. In addition, consideration of intervening and mediating variables (→ Media Effects: Direct and Indirect Effects) showed that these reactions had been based on conditional instead of direct effects (Lang & Lang 1981; Wartella & Reeves 1985). Bineham (1988) explains the differing interpretations of these early studies with the idea that advocates and critics of

the received view had a very different understanding of what the hypodermic needle model meant. Advocates see the recognition of intervening variables as mere elaborations upon the hypodermic model if the studies still assume that mass communication is a one-directional and linear process; critics of the received view see the recognition of differences among media audiences and the inclusion of mediating variables as a break from the established tradition (Bineham 1988).

It can be concluded that within the social science tradition of media effects research, the position occupied by critics of the received history has rapidly gained popularity and persuasiveness. However, the opposing camp has seen some changes. It is no longer populated by those early authors who adopted Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) first scheme without further reflection. Instead, it now consists primarily of critics of social-science-oriented media effects research. These are primarily representatives of a critical or cultural paradigm who see most social scientific or empirical effects research as an elaboration of the hypodermic model tradition because – in their view – it conceptualizes the sender, message, and receiver as isolatable elements and sees the receiver as a largely passive target of message manipulation (Bineham 1988; → Critical Theory; Cultural Studies). Bineham (1988) sees the *battle for the past* as a highly significant effort between opposing camps to define the history of mass communication research in specific ways in order to justify their current respective positions.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Advertising ▶ Communication as a Field and Discipline ▶ Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968 ▶ Critical Theory ▶ Cultural Studies ▶ Katz, Elihu ▶ Lasswell, Harold D. ▶ Lazarsfeld, Paul F. ▶ Media Effects: Direct and Indirect Effects ▶ Media Effects, History of ▶ Media Effects, Strength of ▶ Propaganda

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Stock Photography

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Stock photography is the name given to a particular type of standardized commercial imagery. This largely consists of clichéd photographs of consumer well-being or corporate achievement: the happy couples on sun-drenched beaches pictured in travel adverts, and the well-groomed businessmen shaking hands who tend to grace company brochures (→ Advertisement, Visual Characteristics of). Stock photography is also the name of the industry that manufactures, promotes, and distributes these images for use in → marketing, → advertising, publishing, and increasingly multimedia products, websites, and other digital platforms (for instance, the sunsets and cloud images one can find on mobile phones). Worth an estimated US$2 billion annually, the industry continues to expand into new areas of image production and supply: its leading corporations own some of the most important historical photographic archives, manufacture and market stock film footage, and compete with traditional sources of → photojournalism. Despite the ubiquity of its products, and estimates that it supplies a majority of the photographs used in advertising and marketing, the stock photography industry is largely overlooked by researchers into photography and consumer culture (exceptions include Miller 1999; Frosh 2003; Machin 2004), and is invisible to the general public.

THE EMERGENCE AND FUNCTIONING OF THE STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY INDUSTRY

Stock photography emerged as a full-fledged, self-conscious industry in the 1970s (on historical precursors see Hiley 1983; Wilkinson 1997). Its main commercial premise is that advertising agencies will find it cheaper, faster, and less risky to "rent" readymade